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EAP FOR SCOT MARCIEL, RSP, MLS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEAN](#) [TH](#)  
SUBJECT: THAI MFA DG ON THE THAI ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP,  
RATIFYING THE CHARTER

REF: BANGKOK 2461

Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle, reasons 1.4 (b, d)

1. (SBU) Summary: Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Department of ASEAN Affairs Director General Vitavas Srivihok shared his views on the Thai chairmanship of ASEAN and prospects for Thai ratification of the Charter August 29. Vitavas expected Thailand would pass necessary implementation and notify the Secretariat of Thai ratification by the end of September and that the Charter would be approved by all ASEAN members by the end of 2008. Vitavas discussed Thailand's three primary objectives as the "Three Rs": realization of the Charter; revitalizing ASEAN as a people centered organization; and reinforcing human security. The MFA had four internal benchmarks for success as the ASEAN Chair: meaningful engagement of Burma as an ASEAN member; advancement of human rights mechanisms; ASEAN branding and education; and promotion of civil society's role in ASEAN. Vitavas said the Thai MFA had a good working relationship with ASEAN SecGen Surin Pitsuwan, who served as Thai FM from 1997-2001, and supported his reform agenda. End Summary.

#### Ratifying the Charter

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2. (SBU) Thailand was in the final stages of approving the ASEAN Charter, DG Vitavas told us August 29. The House and Senate had actually already approved the Charter; what remained was passage of implementing legislation affecting privileges and immunities. Vitavas said the MFA had been engaging a Parliamentary committee on a weekly basis to discuss the six articles which required enabling legislation prior to ratification. Following Parliamentary committee actions and approval, the legislation would be reviewed by the Senate before being returned to the Parliament for publication in the Parliamentary Gazette and formal notification to the Secretariat in Jakarta. Given progress made to date, Vitavas expected the process would be completed by the end of September.

#### Thai vision as ASEAN Chair

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3. (SBU) Vitavas described Thailand's "Three Rs" strategy for its chairmanship during ASEAN's transition period. The first "R" stood for successful realization and implementation of the new ASEAN Charter. A key component would be completion of a final draft proposal on human rights issues by mid 2009, with an aim of instituting the new human rights mechanism at the ASEAN summit in November or December 2009. The second "R" stood for revitalizing ASEAN as a people-centered organization. Vitavas said he wanted to encourage greater understanding of ASEAN; this would include efforts to brand ASEAN as an organization responsive to the needs of its people and focused on community building. The third "R" stood for reinforcing human security; Vitavas noted particular focus on energy, food, and support mechanisms for natural disasters. (Note: When Singapore took over ASEAN

Chairmanship in 2007, it identified three key areas of work as the 3-C's: the Charter; community-building; and common challenges.)

¶4. (SBU) In addition to the overarching 3-R's strategy, Vitavas indicated that Thailand had four internal success benchmarks for its ASEAN chairmanship: meaningful engagement of Burma as an ASEAN member; advancement of human rights mechanisms; ASEAN branding and education; and effective promotion civil society, to include encouragement of open and active ASEAN participation.

#### The Burma challenge

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¶5. (C) In noting Burma's expeditious ratification of the amended ASEAN charter, Vitavas commented that Burma was of the mid-set to adopt the Charter first and take action later. Vitavas said he had been trying to convince his Burmese colleagues in the ASEAN Director Generals' group that Thai chairmanship of ASEAN was a golden opportunity for Burma to initiate changes. Vitavas advised that Thailand supported transparency and democratic reform in Burma and was prepared to assist Burma in such efforts in whatever way Burma desired. Vitavas commented that Burma typically relied on quiet back-door diplomacy to effect change.

¶6. (C) Acknowledging differences in the U.S. and Thai approaches after we reiterated the U.S. policy perspective on fostering democratic change in Burma, Vitavas discussed how Thailand as a neighboring country preferred to take a less confrontational approach to engaging Burma rather than rely on sanctions. Vitavas said that the Burmese had told the

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Thais to expect positive news on Burma's democratic progress by October 2009. While acknowledging that such past promises were never realized, Vitavas distinguished this pledge as being delivered privately to Thailand rather than publicly through the media. We warned Vitavas that ASEAN's credibility and ability to move forward with ambitious plans to promote political and economic integration would be severely hampered by Burma's reluctance to meet not just the demands of the international community at large, but even the expectations of the other ASEAN countries.

#### Upgrading the Secretariat, engaging a Thai SecGen

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¶7. (C) Vitavas advised that Thailand was still working to identify an ambassador to appoint to ASEAN by the deadline of January 2, 2009 and to address budgetary issues associated with ASEAN. Notwithstanding ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan's affiliation with the opposition Democrat Party in Thailand, Vitavas said that there was good coordination and communication between Thai diplomats and former FM Surin on ASEAN issues, and that the Thai goals as chair largely mirror Surin's agenda for ASEAN that he has nurtured since serving as FM from 1997-2001.

¶8. (SBU) Vitavas agreed that the Charter had empowered a larger role for Surin as ASEAN chief. Surin was actively reconstructing the ASEAN Secretariat, having secured approval to expand the current two deputy SecGen slots provided by member states to four, with the additional pair coming from outside. Vitavas said Thailand hoped to implement some of the proposed structural changes to ASEAN, to include incorporation of a new administrative group and two new Deputy Secretary-Generals, by mid January 2009.

¶9. (SBU) Vitavas was also optimistic about the potential for approval of proposals generated by two working groups Thailand had chaired: on the establishment of an ASEAN human rights body and legal dispute mechanisms; and for approval of blue-print road maps established for ASEAN economic, political-security, and socio-cultural communities at the 14th ASEAN Summit to be held in Bangkok in December 2008. This measures would usher in a new era for ASEAN, contended

Vitavas.  
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